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ABSTRACT

American society is obsessed with "credentials," much of it brought about by institutions of higher education. The proper credentials are those determined by Middle America, and those on the outside, the minorities, must accept these credentials and ways to obtain them before they are allowed "in." "Who should go to college?" is a Middle America question, and because of political pressures Middle America is no longer prepared to tell anyone he should not try to go. The burden of proof has thus shifted from those trying to get in, to those who would keep them out. Being "in" is not the only issue; institutions of higher education are out of touch with the new knowledge and the new society of the young. Though, in the areas of law, medicine, architecture, and science, society is used as a laboratory, the social science and humanities sectors, those subjects which bear most directly upon a person's search for himself in the context of his time, have ignored the world around them. This failure has led to much of the disruption on the streets and campuses. Colleges have become places where young people are being prepared for one version of life, while removing them from life during the preparation. It is essential that institutional forms be changed in order to move rapidly to a higher standard of excellence compatible with a society committed to a higher standard of civilization. (AF)

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WHO SHOULD GO TO COLLEGE?*

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I. Nomads in Paper Tents.

I was Dean of The New School in New York during the backwash of the Hungarian Revolt and the Cuban Revolution when the academic and intellectual refugees came around looking for new careers and new lives. They were a people carrying with them their own paper tents, nomads who always came lugging folders and briefcases full of papers, clutching yellowed scraps in their hands, anxious to talk first not about themselves, but about the pieces of paper they were always so eager to spread out on your desk. Visas and work permits, frayed clippings reporting great achievements in the past, official letters of recommendation stamped with seals, diplomas and certificates decorated with ribbons, notarized statements of health---the few material possessions rescued from disaster to prove conclusively that they were in fact still alive, individually unique, really standing before you, breathing and warm.

I think it must be one of the laws of nature that societies or classes that are very old or very sick or in deep trouble reduce almost all of the significant relationships among their citizens to paper transactions. It is as if the people, terribly unsure of themselves individually or together, seek solace in some non-human, external evidence of their humanity. Having lost confidence in their ability to judge each other face-to-face, they rely on the "objectivity" of the credential to prove that they still breathe, that they have distinct talents, and that their world, sick and disordered, still has some rationale, some absolute "standard" which cannot be jailed, exiled, or impoverished, proving magically, their humanity.

II. Institutions in Credential Bags.

The institutions of Middle America, in their maturity, live more and more in paper bags. In the conduct of my own professional affairs, I am less and less amused by the extent to which relationships with colleagues, with faculty and students, with industry and government, with those who invite me to give speeches and write books, rely at the crucial points upon some estimate not of me in person or of each other, but of the credentials involved, the secondary evidence that we are what we are.

Our colleges and universities, among the most powerful and important institutions Middle America has produced to serve itself, have launched a new era of credentialism in America. And having invented their own unique credentials, and

HE 001 576

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persuaded other powerful sectors in our country to honor, revere and seek them, we are now stuck with the meaning of them.

Subtly over time, but almost irrevocably now, we have institutionalized the formulas and computations upon which most of our business is based. Earned high school averages are squared and multiplied by composite SAT's. Budget lines are divided by Ph.D.'s and the number of inches a man's publication list is. Human beings requiring offices or classroom seats are multiplied by a square footage exponent according to rank and class to define what a campus is. In the state legislatures and governing boards the learning enterprise is reduced to that remarkable invention of the latter twentieth century---the Full Time Equivalent---a mysterious, ethereal personality related to its first cousin, the Credit Hour Cost. Finally, union cards are issued out of all this, imbued with a value essential to obtaining employment, finding a wife, enjoying the theater, or even living with one's self.

Having institutionalized our way-of-life in this manner, it is essential to exalt institutionalization as a way-of-life. The educational institution, being a collection of things living through efficient academic circulatory and respiration systems, naturally is larger and qualitatively superior to any person or group of persons it is meant to serve. The institutions live, having become personalities more real than the persons in them. The highest service a human can perform is to his institution. Ask not what your institution can do for you. Join the team ---Accreditation, your favorite professional association, the Course-and-Standing or Promotions-and-Tenure Committees.

III. America in the Middle.

One of the most deeply held values to which Middle America is devoted is the conviction that all of America should Join Its Team. As applied to the poor, the Black, and the Spanish-speaking, this value they called Integration.

Integration means that the official invitation To Join is officially extended to all Equally. This is not quite the same thing as equal opportunity, as many who have responded to the invitation have come to know.

All to whom the official invitation is equally extended are subjected to the test of the majority's credentials, outcome of which determines who shall Get In, equally. The credential-tests embody, of course, the majority's aspirations, its estimate of Quality, its version of Merit. The outcome of the tests must be respected in order to Maintain Standards.

Within the context of this definition of Integration, the majority resolves the natural tension in its value commitments between Egalitarianism, on the one hand, and Meritocracy, on the other. Equal access to the rewards of being in the elite cadres of our society is insured. All one must do is accept, and then master the intricacies of the Quality and Standards maintained in the credential-tests. About these, there is a broad consensus among the majority. Consequently, even those among the majority who end up rejected, accept their fate with some equanimity. For most of us, what we have developed here, Works Well. Consequently, about any injustice resulting from its Working Well, we are more or less Silent. America's Silent Majority is largely a function of the Silence of the majority of its academic and intellectual institutionalized centers---its schools, colleges, and universities.

IV. Self-Estimates.

"Who Should Go To College" is not a very interesting or relevant question for most of us because the answer to it is so abundantly clear. Everyone should go to college who conforms to our estimate of ourselves. Or, to put it another way, the ones who should not go to college are those who do not conform to our self-estimates.

"Who Should Go To College" is strictly a Middle America question. Basically, the answer is settled and non-controversial.

We are obliged to defend the answer. A failure to uphold our version of Quality, a compromise of the Standards we Maintain, any qualification of the definition of Integration we espouse, seriously subvert the meaning of ourselves, the things to which we, as a nation, aspire. Consequently, the most dangerous thing we can do is to tamper with membership qualifications for the union cards. We are committed irrevocably to an anti-inflation policy regarding the Degrees. A line must be drawn somewhere, and this is where we draw it. Class is not an issue in America. Still, the question: Who Should Go To College? is a question of class, and in our country, therefore, of race. The issue is: Who Should Not Get In? given the way we have defined what Getting In means. The issue is: Why are we compelled to face questions of class and race when there really are no problems of class and race intended here?

V. "Their" Young.

The edges and borderlines of a rug not only define its dimensions, but also inevitably, set the conditions for the pattern in the middle. The edges and borderlines of American society have raised some embarrassing questions about the middle. The edges and borderlines of the state of our knowledge, have raised some embarrassing questions about what we think we know, and what we know.

These questions are embarrassing only because they challenge the answers we have been giving.

The educational answer we have been giving to the questions represented by the poor, the Black, and the Spanish-speaking is: Make them employable. They are not now employable because they have not mastered sufficiently (a) the language of the land, (b) the number systems upon which so many technological jobs depend, and because (c) many of them, for reasons that remain somewhat obscure, don't seem to want to work.

Our programmatic implementation of the answer we give is addressed almost exclusively, however imperfectly, to (a) and (b) above. They don't have to go to college to learn English and how to add and subract. Or, if they insist upon a piece of the prestige we have built into our own credentials, the two-year colleges, according to the highest authority in the land, are especially meant to equalize opportunity for Them. This is a way of insuring that the heart of our meaning will remain pure. We don't need to mess up what we really mean in order to make Them employable.

This response is not especially addressed to significant areas of deep concern among Americans, especially young Americans. It is not a complete response to the rescue of a people from the backwash of slavery, to the search by the young

for the meaning of themselves, to the meaning of a technology which has contaminated our environment, to versions of law and order which to many seem unjust, or to medieval academic notions of due process which are now properly challenged.

This response imperfectly connects the salient issues of our time to the traditional purposes of learning, especially in the social sciences and the humanities, to those subjects which bear most directly upon a person's search for himself in the context of his time.

This response fails to account for the deep valleys and tall peaks of ability and talent which may be embodied in a single human being, a human being who, through no basic fault of his own, may be unable to manipulate the language and number systems upon which successful competition in a technological economy depends, but who at the same time possesses, as a consequence of his life-experience, a keen and refined understanding of his situation in American society, his destiny in this culture.

VI. "Our" Young.

Deep in our hearts, far more disturbing than the questions we are asked by the poor, the Black and the Spanish-speaking, are the questions our own children are asking.

What is so good about the Good Life we are living? How relevant are the things we say are important? Power to the People? Do they mean us? Our children may all be on pot, but they think we are in a daze.

The educational answer we give to their questions is: Given where we have been, and where we are, We Know Better. If this life is not so Good, remember, it is the Best there is. Relevance has nothing to do with learning. In fact relevance is a threat to "education" as we have defined it. And as for Power to the People, Come Off It! Getting In already proves power. The Team has been Joined.

Meantime, we know We Know Better. Our rockets, divorce and crime-rates, and our own salaries under the new union contracts, all soar. It is, after all, an upward-bound situation, however uptight some people may be. Our educational institutions are monuments to the fact that We Know Better.

VII. Blackballing.

We have been out-of-touch or we are growing out-of-touch with those we say we are most concerned about. The disconnection between urban secondary school systems and the colleges is growing. At the very time that the expectation of Getting In is being extended to almost everyone who graduates from the secondary schools, the freshman and even the sophomore year in the colleges is becoming a vast remedial operation. For those who are college-bound, the first half of the senior high school year is a test-taking ordeal. The applications are all posted by February. From then on nothing counts except one's capacity to cope with the anxiety. The last year of secondary school is a wasteland.

Something less than three-fourths of those enrolled attend classes on a typical day in New York City's high schools. Throughout most of the Black and Puerto Rican communities in the City only about a third of those enrolled in high school, receive the diploma. Even before being poor or being Black disrupted our way of

doing college business, only about half of those who were not poor and not Black (and met our traditional standards) graduated from the colleges to which we admitted them.

For those Dropping Out, Getting In is properly a secondary problem. Many of our institutions are in a panic about what letting almost every body in will mean in terms of numbers and "standards", but the best way for our Establishment to keep the numbers under control is to encourage everyone to cross the thresholds freely in our system---at kindergarten, at the freshman levels in high school and college, and at the first year of graduate or professional study. Obviously, what we do from those points on efficiently encourages a sufficient number to drop out so that only a "reasonable" number of the applicants for union membership will be issued the card. This may be a somewhat expensive, but nonetheless effective way for us to solve simultaneously our political and professional problems. We have perfected systems of education that successfully dampen, for most, the human urge and need to learn. By substituting institutional for human needs, we have invented a way to insure the integrity of our institutions, as we now define "integrity."

At a time when blackballs are not fashionable, we are finding other ways to project America's class and race problems through the country's educational system. By doing this we may insure for the future a continued polarization of American life. If we choose to concentrate the minority youth in the two-year colleges and "make them employable" programs in the metropolitan regions, and usher them in-and-out of inappropriate senior college programs, it may just occur to them that what we mean by Equal Opportunity amounts to just another "hustle."

VIII. Knowledge Factors.

Our basic collegiate formulae--- four academic years and one hundred and twenty credit hours, more or less---have been tested by time. In this country they predate the automobile, the electric light, TV, the split atom, pictures and rocks from the moon, the rise and decline of Hitler, the Russian Revolution, the birth fo Martin Luther King and the Death of God, the mini-skirt and Vietnam. Black study curricula, an extension of the elective option, the junior year abroad, and massive tutorial remedial programs are all but minor adjustments of the basic, time-tested institutional form. The two-year college movement, like Alexander's or Korvettes in New York, has turned out to be but a bargain-basement version of Macy's or Bloomingdale's. The shoppers in the discount houses are no more revolutionary than the managers and the clerks behind the counters. To the best of their economic ability, they are pursuing the same things that the shoppers in Macy's and Bloomingdale's are pursuing. And of course, as one would expect, parts of Macy's are turning out to be just like parts of Korvettes, and vice versa, which has the effect of further specializing Tiffany's clientele.

It is remarkable how medieval principles of academic time and form remain impervious to the spectacular changes in the quantity and quality of our knowledge. Miraculously, regardless of what there is to know or what the meaning of it is, a liberated, red-blooded American adult, employable, intelligently participatory politically, culturally refined and sexually well-adjusted, can be produced in 120 credit hours, more or less. Surely this ranks among the greatest of the American technological achievements along with TV and the moon-walk.

At even the introductory levels of professional education---in architectures, the law, social work, nursing, medicine and others---the state of the knowldege is compelling both the students and the teachers to take to the streets. In urban planning the masters-doctoral program at Columbia now requires an extensive field experience, preferably in Harlem. At Toronto some architectural students now spend their entire master's program on practical projects in the neighborhoods of the city. President Levi at Chicago, having presided as Dean of the Law School over the elaboration and temporal extension of legal education there, now argues for shortening the formal curriculum and the return of the apprenticeship. The lines separating the medical college from the functioning hospital and the community centers for the massive delivery of public health services are demonstrably anti-educational barriers. In medicine the technicians, the physicians and the managers are increasingly compelled to seek their knowledge and practice their arts together, in the same operational places at the same time. And in this profession, as in others, as the traditional walls compartmentalizing learning and acting, campus and community, crumble, politics, scientific knowledge, ethics, technological know-how, and managerial expertise fuse into an educational situation disrespectful of the traditional institutional forms and methods. In graduate education, where our teaching profession perpetuates itself, deep resistance to the new situation remains, but in time even this must change.

In the sciences, at all levels, we require our students to get their hands dirty early in the game. How many cat cadavers have been ruined by neophytes learning how to cut? We have not converted these mistakes into a national Law and Order issue. We have not viewed these errors as irrevocable compromises of our standards.

But the failure to understand the importance of the laboratory in the social science and humanities sectors of our institutions has led us to convert the streets and the campuses into laboratories for disruption. Extensive as our students' deficiencies are in English and mathematics, their ignorance in the freedom subjects is worse. What we have been through underscores the decay of our learning communities. Not only is student government a failure, but as it turns out, faculty democracy is an illusion. The strongest and most distinguished departments of sociology, political science, psychology, and economics turn out to be paralyzed and irrelevent on their campuses at the moment of truth. Distinguished scholars who travel regularly to Washington to advise others on how to run the country, turn out to have little to say when their won academic ghettos erupt.

Such is the price to paid when the institutions themselves have dropped out.

IX. Anarchy and the Kibbutz.

Bruno Bettelheim and Paul Goodman, disagreeing about almost everything else, agree that we have encouraged too many young Americans to disengage from the working realities of our society at the wrong times for the wrong reasons. They believe that we have oversold the value of our credentials, and that now, to accommodate the unrealistic expectations we have raised, we have created educational institutions which are against learning and invite disruption. Though opposed to each other on most things, they both propose that we put the young back to work, purging the rosters of our colleges and universities so that they may return to their traditional scholarly pursuits.

They are both partly right, but being right, sometimes, is partly quixotic. They remind me of faculty members who argue, all at once, that class sizes and teaching loads should simultaneously be reduced in order to teach better the new hordes of "deficient" students coming in. When they are told that class sizes and teaching loads cannot simultaneously be reduced within the framework of an established and fixed budget, they argue, as a matter of principle, for increasing the budget. And when they are told the budget won't increase, and they must make a hard choice, they invariably opt for the reduced teaching loads; and the new students---unable to speak or write English decently, add or subtract, or venture properly to be free---are stuffed into the larger classes, taught by those enjoying the higher salaries and shorter hours negotiated through the last union contract.

We all have our priorities, including my country. The decisions I must make now in preparation for the next academic year cannot assume that American priorities include the conversion of the nation into one giant Israeli kibbutz or some state of somebody's version of anarchy. I cannot assume that this national Administration's understanding of my problems will lead it to equip me with what I need to make everybody happy.

The young should return to the workshops of our society. They must be re-engaged, but not because of some abstract sociological or psychological theory or ulterior economic motive. Re-engagement is essential now to master significant parts of the new knowledge and to achieve a wisdom about what one must know. Re-engagement is a practical, scholarly, survival matter.

Becasue of what there is to learn and how it may best be learned now, it is as wrong to separate institutionally learning from working as it is to separate institutionally working from learning. But the reunification of thinking and acting, of learning and working, of formal institutionalized education and practical decision-making experience requires a major revision of existing institutional forms and commitments. Such a revision would mean a reconsideration of the meaning of our credentials---of what we mean by Quality, of how we value experience, of the kinds of talents we honor, of the Standards we ought to Maintain. The majority must reconsider its basic assumptions about itself. This is a part of what those now Wanting In are trying to tell us.

Our colleges have become consummate machines for boxing people in, for preparing them for one version of life while removing them from life during the preparation. The state of our knowledge and the urban environment we have produced require new institutional forms so people can be set free to learn.

X. Pollution.

The pressures immediately ahead for far-reaching reform or for brutal repression, will be very great. We are on the threshold of a very delicate three to five years when the outcome of more than a decade of intense polarization will become abundantly clearer. Without really knowing what we were doing, without anything like a proper preparation, perhaps stupidly, we have made a major commitment from which there is no retreat. We have simultaneously done everything in our power to underscore the exclusivity of our credentials, and then invited everyone to try and get them.

A little more than a century after Horace Mann, we are extending his principles beyond the twelfth grade. Having invited everybody who "qualifies" and desires it (Sec. 508 of the Amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1968), to get a college education, we are suddenly confronted with a multitude of new questions about "qualifications" which expose in a unique way how rigid, sterile, and stultifying so much of American collegiate education has become. Having sealed ourselves in the capsule, and embarked upon the greatest field trip of them all; we have found on the surface of the moon more new questions than new answers. Being on the moon makes us see, with a sense of shock, how far the pollution of the fragile atmosphere back at home has gone.

Under these circumstances, given the options we have advanced and the values we have placed upon them, either no one should go to college, or everyone should. It all depends upon our view of the capacity of man's mind now, and what vehicle we design for his trip. But under utterly novel conditions, our colleges must move and change in order to survive. America's young will take off now, and they will either be clobbered as few other generations have been, or they will lead us all to something new.

XI. Who Should Be Kept Out?

Given the heights to which American society has soared, and the complex and sophisticated knowledge now required, which human talents can we afford to squander? At what levels? To whom will we say now Keep Out? And Why? Because of sex, age, race, previous condition of servitude, or prior stupidity in our planning?

Partly because of the real dedication of some Americans to the values that are supposed to guide this nation, partly because of the embarrassment of some others at the past failures of our educational systems, but largely because of good old-fashioned American political pressure, we have finally answered the question, Who Should Go To College? The answer is: We are no longer prepared to tell anyone that he should not try to go.

This is progress. The burden of proof has shifted from those trying to get in to those who would keep them out. At last we must re-examine the institutional standards and values as critically as we have always examined those of the persons wanting into them.

Having settled this, however, reluctantly, there is little time left for an academic debate. All of America's institutions, her industries, her professions, her churches, and her schools and colleges must move rapidly to higher standards of excellence compatible with a society committed to moving to a higher standard of civilization. Now we must invent the new institutional forms compatible with the new knowledge and our new view of the American opportunity.

But let us be clear about one thing: A failure to do this with dispatch and total commitment, will be "our" failure---not "theirs". Finally, in this matter, we must live with ourselves.

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